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ABSTRACT

This paper explores possibilities of using the feature film, "American History X," to illustrate and assist in teaching principles of self-concept in an introduction to interpersonal communication course. The paper: (1) summarizes the plot of the film; (2) outlines and defines principles of self-concept that can be discussed in conjunction with the film, including self-esteem/self-worth, roles, role repertoire, role rigidity, and role conflict; and (3) demonstrates how the principles of self-concept can be illustrated and taught using the film. The paper concludes that there are many different principles of interpersonal communication that can be observed in this film, and it is also a rich resource for demonstrating many currently prevalent social and cultural concepts which students need to become good world citizens. (Contains 24 references.) (EF)

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USING THE FEATURE FILM AMERICAN HISTORY X TO TEACH PRINCIPLES OF SELF-CONCEPT IN THE INTRODUCTION TO INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION COURSE

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Introduction

Scholars in many academic disciplines have explored the possibilities of using feature films as pedagogical tools. Scholars in Anthropology (see: Rohrl, 1981); Communication (see: Lamoureux, 2000; Proctor, 2000; Proctor and Adler, 1991; Siddens, 1990 and 1992; and Welker, 2000); English Language, Writing, Literature and TESOL (see: Chappell, 1986; Moss, 1985; and Parker, 1976); Instructional Media (see: Bailey and Ledford, 1994); Psychology (see: Connor, 1996; Author Unknown, 1995; and Tyler and Reynolds, 1998); Sex Education (see: Maynard, 1972); Sociology (see: Burton, 1988; Groce, 1992; and Tipton and Tiemann, 1993); and World History (see: Cortes and Thompson, 1990) have all explored this topic from many different perspectives.

This manuscript adds to that body of knowledge by exploring how one specific feature film, American History X, (Kaye, 1998) can be used to illustrate and assist in teaching principles of self-concept in the Introduction to Interpersonal Communication course. This manuscript: 1) summarizes the plot of American History X; 2) outlines and defines some principles of self-concept that can be discussed in conjunction with the film; and 3) demonstrates how the principles of self-concept cited in this manuscript can be illustrated and taught using the film American History X.

A Plot Summary of American History X

From the direction, plot, characters, and actors, to the editing, lighting, audio, and cinematography, American History X is a powerful, disturbing, and extremely well crafted film. It is unusual for the Director of a major Hollywood theatrical release feature film to also serve as the film's principle cinematographer, but that is the case

in this film, and fortunately, it serves to strengthen the film even further, rather than weakening it.

First, the plot of the film: The film takes place in the late nineteen-nineties in the Venice Beach area of Los Angeles, California. It centers around the Vinyard family: a mother (played by Beverly D'Angelo), father, eldest son (Derek, played by Edward Norton), eldest daughter, younger son (Daniel, played by Edward Furlong) and younger daughter.

The father is a firefighter for the city of Los Angeles, who is murdered by a black person while fighting a fire in a black neighborhood. Derek is of high school age when this occurs, and he appears to have been a "normal" child up to this point. He is shown to be a basketball player and a good, attentive student. During the process of grieving his father's death, Derek finds himself overcome by feelings of hate and rage. He encounters a white supremacist (Cameron, played by Stacey Keach), who becomes his mentor, and who feeds Derek's anger and hatred. Derek soon becomes a co-leader of the white supremacist group, with Cameron. Derek shaves his head, and adorns his torso and arms with several tattoos signaling his beliefs, such as swastikas, hate mottoes and other images. He also trains his body as well as his mind, becoming very powerful and imposing physically as well.

Cameron convinces Derek to lead, and participate in, several violent acts, while Cameron himself stays in the background. For instance, at Cameron's urging, Derek incites a gang of his compatriots to completely ransack a grocery, formerly run by a Caucasian, now run by a Korean immigrant, and to beat and brutalize the non-white employees of the grocery.

Eventually Derek kills two young black men while they are trying to steal Deriks vehicle. Derek spends three years in the state prison at Chino. During Derek's time in prison, he at first aligns himself with other skin head inmates, but eventually begins to see that his skin head allies do not share his philosophical fervor, and is disappointed to find that some of his "brothers in Aryan supremacy" sell drugs, and interact in other ways, with Chicanos, blacks and other minorities, just to make money illegally while in prison.

Eventually, the other skin heads tire of Derek's fervor and criticisms, he is raped in the prison shower by them, and he has to fend for himself in the prison against the other ethnic groups. He eventually becomes friends with a black inmate, who helps him survive prison, and also to begin to see people for who and what they are, rather than just as a color. By the time his prison term is done, Derek has rejected his white supremacist beliefs, and is ready to pick up the pieces of his and his families lives, and to move forward with their lives after he leaves prison.

However, while Derek is in prison, his brother, Danny, begins to follow in Dereks footsteps, becoming a skin head himself, and interacting with Cameron, as well as other skin heads. On his return from prison, Derek seeks to show Danny the error of his and Danny's ways.

This brief summary does not begin to describe all the interpersonal and intercultural nuances of this film, all the subplots and characters of the film, nor does it give away how the film ends. It also does not reveal the very careful way in which the narrative line of the film functions. The story is told from two perspectives; a current time line, and a back story of events in the past that lead up to the current time line.

The film begins at 7:00 AM on the morning that Derek is released from prison and it ends almost literally twenty four hours later, the morning of the next day. As Derek is being released from prison, Danny is called into his principals office (played by Avery Brooks), and is being reprimanded for writing a history paper that glorifies Adolph Hitler's book Mien Kampf. Danny's punishment is to take his history course from his principal and his first assignment is to write a paper in which he explains the impact of his brothers imprisonment on himself. (The principal taught Derek's English literature classes when Derek was in high school, and is aware of Derek's transition from athlete and good student to skinhead.)

Through the device of Danny writing his paper, the audience is shown all the past events that lead up to the current twenty four hour time frame. All the scenes of the film that occur during the "current" twenty four hour period are shot in color. All the past scenes are shot in black and white, and the cinematography and lighting in these scenes is of particular note. It is as though this part of the film was shot by Ansel Adams, the renowned black and white scenic photographer. The framing, the lighting and the use of shadow in these black and white scenes is superb, as is the narrative device of telling the story from these two perspectives. The film provides a wealth of content that relates to film and video production; self-concept; interpersonal relationships; family relationships; and intercultural communication; to name but a few.

Using American History X to teach Principles of Self-Concept

There are many more theories and concepts that can be examined in the classroom using this film than are possible to explore through this manuscript. Therefore, this

manuscript focuses specifically on theories and ideas related to self-concept that might be explored in an Introduction to Interpersonal Communication class.

This manuscript now defines five specific theories of self concept that are commonly worked with in Introduction to Interpersonal Communication classes, and applies them to American History X: 1) Self-Esteem/Self-Worth; 2) How we use Roles in our lives; 3) Role Repertoire; 4) Role Rigidity; and 5) Role Conflict.

Self-Esteem/Self-Worth

An important part of what forms our public and private self-concepts is our self-esteem. Self-esteem can be defined as how much or how little we like who we perceive ourselves to be. Self-esteem is usually measured on a scale from high to low. People with a high self-esteem like the person they perceive themselves to be, and generally feel good about themselves and have a positive outlook on life. These people tend to be more outgoing and interact with people more readily. People with a low self-esteem do not like the person they perceive themselves to be, and generally feel badly about themselves and have a negative outlook on life. These people tend to be more introverted, and to shy away from contact with other people. In these ways, self-esteem affects your public and private selves significantly.

There are several interesting examples of how self-esteem works in this film. For instance, the characters of Seth and Stacey seem to find their self-worth through being a part of the skinhead culture. It becomes obvious through this film that neither of these people think very highly of themselves outside the skinhead group, but that they have found acceptance in this group, and that they have also found their self-esteem through this group. Being a part of this culture gives them their senses of self-worth. Stacey, in particular, seems to find her sense of self worth not

just through the skinheads, but also through being Dereks girlfriend, and through his status as a leader of the skinheads. This situation and context will be addressed further later in this manuscript.

How We Use Roles in our Lives

To further define how the self-concept works in our everyday lives, and how we are able to manage and maintain all the "different selves" that seem to exist in our lives, we often talk to our students about the concept of roles, and some of the other ideas that emerge from that concept: such as role repertoire; role rigidity and role conflict. All of these concepts are clearly demonstrated in American History X, and will be examined further in this manuscript.

The General Concept of Roles

First, we will look at a definition of roles, and how the concept of roles is demonstrated in American History X. The different public selves that we present to other people often are framed, or created, within a particular set of obligations or duties that we have, or sometimes they exist because of our social activities and occupations. Trenholm and Jensen (1996) call these different public selves that we use to interact with other people, "roles" that we play. One single person can be a daughter, a sister, a mother, a graduate student, a high school teacher, a friend, and an athlete. Each of these aspects of that persons life constitute a very important role that she plays, and requires a different public self to present to the people with whom she interacts. The roles that we play in our lives are also subject to change as we grow, evolve, and as we encounter new social and occupational contexts.

In American History X, we see many examples of people playing different roles in different social contexts, and many shifts, or attempted shifts, in roles that people

play. For instance, Dereks brother Danny, is seen playing one role in school, and with his skinhead compatriots, as a tough guy skinhead. However, with his Mother and his Sisters, he plays a different role as a sensitive and caring son and brother. This is demonstrated very clearly in a scene toward the beginning of the film, when Derek returns home from prison, and when a skinhead friend named Seth comes to the Vinyard families apartment to visit Derek on his release. Seth videotapes Danny playing the role of a devout skinhead, spouting the racist and violent dogma of that group, but prior to Seths arrival, Danny is seen playing the role of a loving, caring, sensitive, teenaged boy in his interaction with his Mother and Sisters.

We also see Derek shift between roles in the film. In the flashbacks in the film it is revealed that Derek once played the role of a seemingly sensitive and intelligent high school student, who was an athlete and scholar. With his Fathers murder, and the influence of Cameron, however, he begins to play the role of bigot and hate-monger, leading the group of skinheads with whom he associates. Eventually though, he begins to see the error of his ways, and attempts to revert back to the more sensitive and caring person that he once was.

We also see people play single roles in the film. Seth, Cameron, and Dereks girlfriend, Stacey, play the roles of bigoted skinheads, and never vary from those roles throughout the film. Avery Brooks plays the role of a high school principle who is willing to stand up for what is right, and who appears to be very strong-willed. These people seem to accept the roles that they play and are comfortable in them, seeing no need to alter roles in differing situations.

These are but a few examples of the discussion of the general topic of roles that can be generated from this film, and that discussion can lead to other aspects of role-

playing in real life, as well, as we will see in this manuscript. There are also many other interesting aspects and nuances of playing roles in our lives that can be discussed through this film, such as what motivates us to choose roles, change roles, what the impact of the roles we play is on our senses of self concept, and so on.

Role Repertoire

Trenholm and Jensen (1996) also tell us that the number of roles that we can successfully play is called our "Role Repertoire." Sometimes we must make drastic shifts between roles. At 2:00 on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, one particular person might be a student in a graduate level class, then during the next class at 3:00 on those days the same person is a graduate teaching assistant. Many of us make the shift from employee to family member on a daily basis. We often have to play many roles in a day for many different audiences.

In this film, Danny is perhaps the clearest exemplar to use for this concept. In the example cited above in the section on roles, we see Danny playing different roles with different sets of people in his life. With his family, he is sensitive and caring; with his skinhead friends, and at school, he is a "tough guy wannabe." We clearly see two roles that Danny must balance in his life.

Derek also provides an example of role repertoire from a different perspective, in that his shifts from role to role are more dramatic in nature, and more sustained over time. He starts out playing the role of a sensitive, caring young man, adopts the role of skinhead, then reverts back to his original, authentic role. Danny and Dereks role shifts mirror one another, but Danny makes his shifts on a daily basis, and Derek makes his shifts over a longer course of time.

Again, there are many different examples of role repertoire in this film, but these two stand out as primary points of discussion for the classroom.

Role Rigidity

Sometimes people are unable to make a shift from a public self-concept to a private self-concept. This is called Role Rigidity. It happens when a person becomes "locked" into a particular role that the person plays as part of her or his public self-concept, and she or he plays that role no matter what the circumstance. For instance, a teacher that treats her family the same way she treats her students displays role rigidity.

In this film, in particular, the characters Seth, Cameron, Derek, and Stacey demonstrate role rigidity in the roles they adopt as skinheads. These roles permeate their lives and they play these roles exclusively in their lives, no matter who their audience is. Seth and Cameron seem to have locked onto this lifestyle completely, and from observing the film, it is likely that this is because they were never able to find acceptance in any mainstream cultural groups. They seem to have no other roles to play.

Derek and Stacey demonstrate some very interesting points of discussion related to Role Rigidity. At one point, after his release from prison, Derek tries to talk Stacey into leaving the skinhead life with him, and she cannot fathom that thought. Stacey provides a particularly interesting example of the phenomena of role rigidity because it becomes obvious that part of Staceys deep attachment to the skinhead lifestyle is the status that Derek has achieved as a leader of the skinhead group. She refers to the fact that Derek is perceived by the skinheads as a "god," and that they

will be safe, and, in particular, that they will be able to have anything they want. Stacey does not seem so locked into the skinhead dogma as she is the lifestyle that Dereks status affords her. She is the girlfriend of the "god" and she does not want to give that up no matter what, hence her adherence to this role no matter what.

Derek, on the other hand, provides an example of role rigidity while he is devoted to the skinhead lifestyle, but he eventually gives up that role and returns to a more practical, righteous and diverse life style, likely demonstrating different roles in differing appropriate social situations. Derek does provide an interesting contrast to Stacey as an example of role rigidity though. While Derek is a skinhead, he really truly believes in the principles and ideals of that group. This is demonstrated several times in the film. He is locked into that role due to a complete, total adherence to the philosophical framework of hatred and bigotry that the group endorses.

For instance, when Derek is in prison, he is disgusted that members of the skinheads sell contraband materials to Hispanics, Asians, blacks and other ethnic groups, and otherwise interact with them for financial gain. Derek is disgusted that his skinhead compatriots do not adhere to the ideas of the culture as strongly as he does and this eventually leads to his downfall as a skinhead. Derek demonstrates role rigidity as a skinhead in its purest form. He subjugates himself to the philosophy entirely.

As previously noted, there are many examples of role rigidity in this film. These are just a few examples. There are many others and many other points of discussion on this topic offered in the film.

Role Conflict

Trenholm and Jensen also note that sometimes circumstances make it very difficult for a person to switch from one role to another. For instance, a medical student that is also a spouse and parent sometimes must work long, difficult hours, taking her or him away from the family for extended periods of time, and this creates a strain on the family relationships and work obligations, as well as causing internal stress and tension, as the person tries to successfully meet the requirements of all of these roles. This is called Role Conflict. Again, American History X provides many useful examples of this phenomena.

Derek and Danny again provide very clear examples of this phenomena in the film. As previously noted, Danny acts one way around his family, and another around the skinheads and at school. In both some subtle and not so subtle ways, Danny demonstrates discomfort reconciling his admiration for his brother, and his desire to follow in his footsteps as a skinhead, and his desire to be true to himself and his family. There is a clear conflict between what Danny believes in his heart is the right way to act, and how he acts as a skinhead tough-guy bigot.

For instance, toward the beginning of the film some black students are assaulting a white student in the high school bath room and Danny intervenes. On the one hand he has to act tough to survive in this school, and he probably needs the reputation of the skinheads to survive, as Derek does in prison, but on the other hand, he also probably wants to help the white student just because he is a good person too, and not so much because he is playing the role of skinhead and bigot.

Then, there is also the conflict in Danny between being a loving son and brother, and being a skinhead. We see many touching scenes between Danny and his mother (who is also ill) and his sisters. In these scenes, I argue that we see the real Danny,

and that he is most conflicted over his different roles in these situations at these times.

Derek also demonstrates the phenomena of role conflict as he tries to reconcile the perceived hypocrisy of his skinhead compatriots, and his own beliefs. His skinhead beliefs are also challenged as he becomes friends with a black prison with whom he works in the prison laundry. He begins to again see people as people and not just as different colors of skin. All his prison experiences lead him to challenge his own beliefs and enable him to find the strength to leave behind the skinhead lifestyle.

This film is rife with examples of roles, role repertoire, role rigidity, and role conflict. These are just a few. There are many more different approaches that can be taken to discussing these topics, and to opening up discussion of these topics.

Conclusion

There are many different principles of interpersonal communication that can be observed in this film, and it is also a very rich resource with which to demonstrate many concepts related to social and cultural issues that are prevalent in the world today, and that our students need to consider to be good world citizens. This manuscript just begins to scratch the surface of how this film can be used in many different classes, and in many different disciplines, to illustrate concepts and ideas of an academic and experiential nature.

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